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Behind China's English Fever: The Contested Discourses on English Education and People's Yearning for Flexible Citizenship

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Behind China's English Fever: The Contested Discourses on English Education and People's Yearning for Flexible Citizenship



Introduction and Research Questions



China's English Fever can be traced back to the 1970s when English replaced Russian in the national foreign language curriculum. As a former Assistant Professor of English in Shanghai, I have had the opportunity not only to witness China's English Fever that has been sweeping the country for almost three decades, but also to teach students who are incredibly enthusiastic in learning English, regardless of their majors and of their initially drastically different English proficiency levels.

What always intrigues me is the question of why: Why are Chinese people so dedicated to learning English?

The proposed study is an attempt to look for some plausible answers to this central question from two related yet separate, not always aligned perspectives: the perspective of the government and that of the common people.

Theoretical Frameworks



Cultural Studies—an interdisciplinary framework in which different disciplines and theories can be drawn to examine the power relations as well as the ideology embedded in the cultural phenomenon..

Critical Discourse Analysis—a type of discourse analytical research that shares a number of tenets with critical theory.

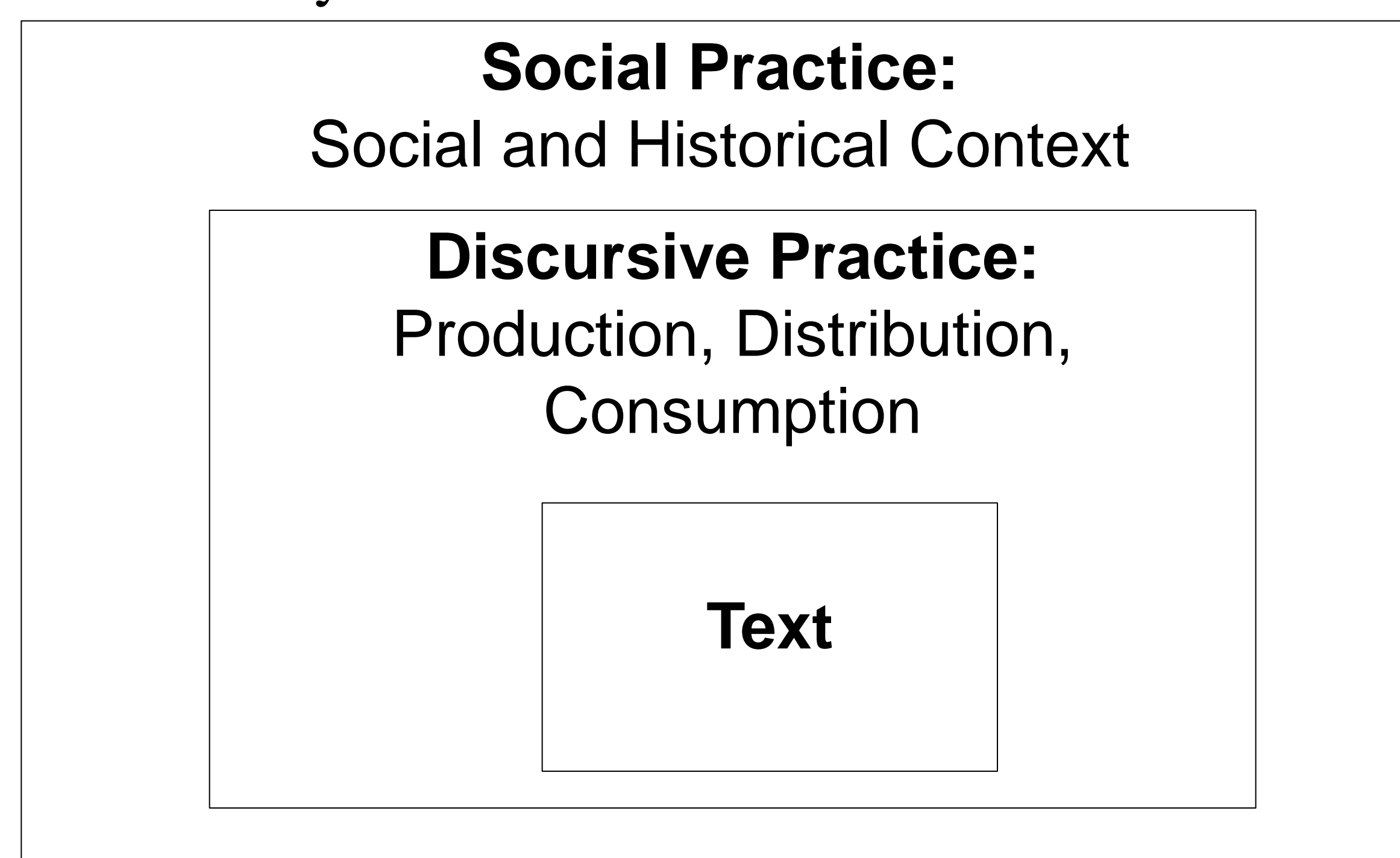


Figure 1. Fairclough's three-dimensional model for CDA

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Method



Research Design: Qualitative research of existing public documents on China's English Fever.

Two Sets of Data: 1) News items, editorials and other relevant publications on English education, collected from China's official media channels, such as *Xinhua News Agency and China Daily*. 2) People's discussion postings about reasons of learning English on major Chinese social media, such as Baidu Tieba and Douban.

Data Analysis: 1) Critical discourse analysis of the first set of data; 2) Thematic analysis of the second set of data.

“Sun Xiaobing, director of the policy and regulation department of the Ministry of Education, made the comment in response to a netizen's question about compulsory English lessons before pupils went to senior high schools.” -- *Xinhua, August 2009*
“People's mania for English learning has wasted education resources and threatened the study of Chinese, said Zhang Shuhua, dean of the information and intelligence institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.” – *Xinhua, March, 2013*

“Abundant research has shown that learning a second language can boost brain power, but a new study suggests that the effects extend to those who begin in middle childhood.” – *China Daily, January 2015*

“It is reported that an ‘English cooling’ reform program will be launched in Beijing this year, under which not only the proportion of English scores in college entrance examinations will be reduced, it is also possible that English classes will be eliminated from the curriculum for students in lower grades of primary schools..” – *China Daily, January 2013*

Figure 2. Quotes from the 1st Data Set

Answers to the question: “Why do you learn English?”*
“In order to go abroad, preferably the U.S. This is my dream.”
“In order to travel abroad. English is the global language.”
“In order to become high rich handsome ☺”
“Because I want to study in Australia.”
“To study in Canada, or the U.S.!!!”
“Go over the Great Wall and go out to the world!”
“For work.”
“Hurry up! Memorize the English vocabulary and then find handsome blonde husbands!”
“You'll have to learn English if you want to move a step upward.”
*Some quotes are translated from Chinese to English by the author

Figure 3. Quotes from the 2nd Data Set

Results



The Chinese government has been swinging between two contested discourses on English education—“English for everyone” (the pro-English discourse) vs. “English not as important as Chinese” (the anti-English discourse).

In answering the question “Why do you learn English?” the two most frequently mentioned reasons are: 1) to go abroad; 2) to move upward by having a better job.

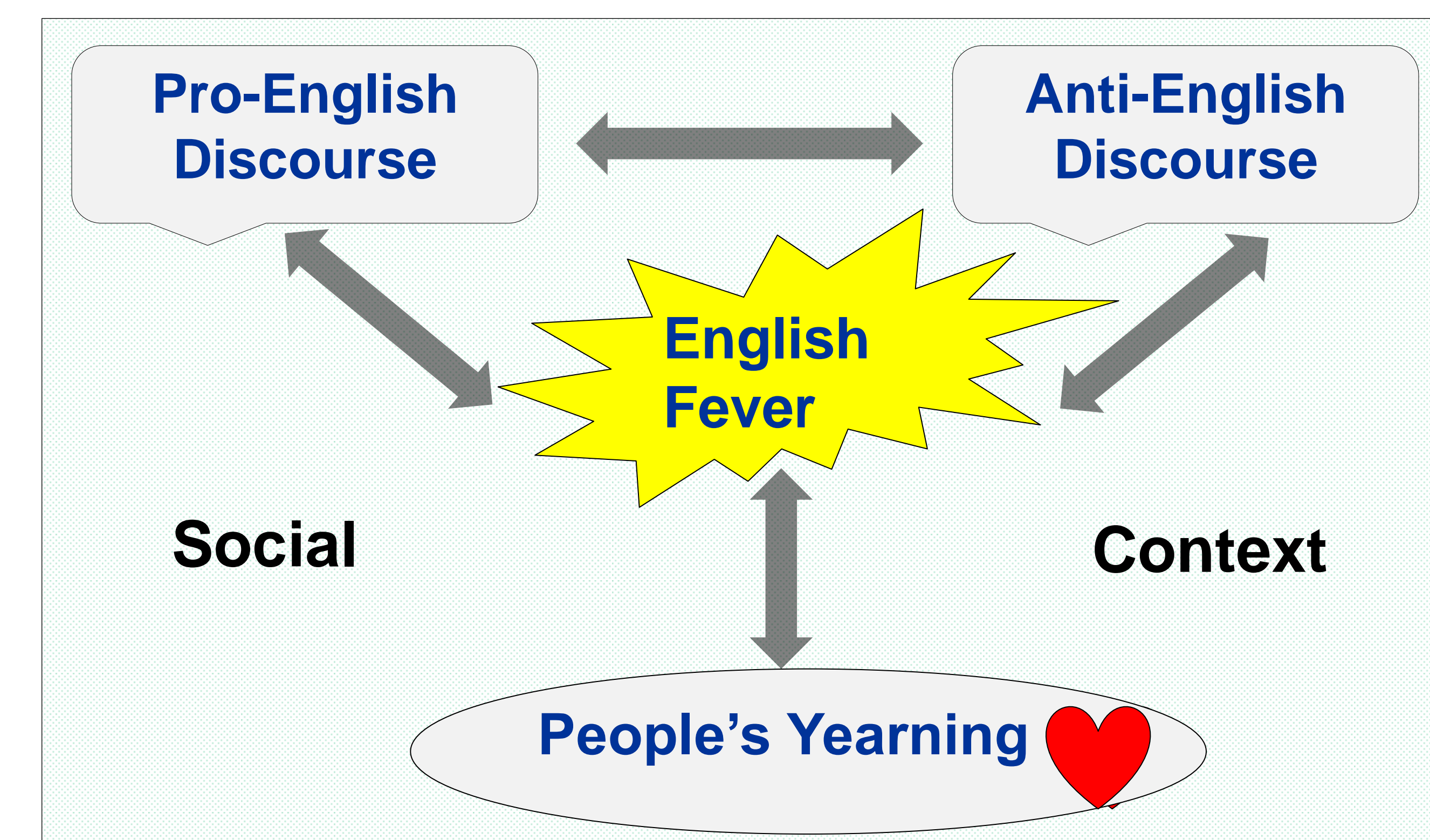


Figure 4. Concept Map

Discussion



China's English fever is much more than an urge to master a global language; instead it is driven both by the government's pro-English language education discourse and by people's yearning for mobility and flexible citizenship.

The Chinese government's contested discourses on the English language education reflect its ambivalent attitudes towards the West, as well as an undercurrent worry about its national identity in an age of globalization and cultural hybridity.